Stacking Beliefs and Participation in Alternative Food Systems

Laurel Valchuis\textsuperscript{a}, David S. Conner\textsuperscript{a}, Linda Berlin\textsuperscript{b} & Qingbin Wang\textsuperscript{a}

\textsuperscript{a} Department of Community Development and Applied Economics, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA
\textsuperscript{b} Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA

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LAUREL VALCHUIS,1 DAVID S. CONNER,1 LINDA BERLIN,2 and QINGBIN WANG1

1Department of Community Development and Applied Economics, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA
2Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont, USA

A movement toward relocalizing communities’ sources of food has been sparked in part by an urge to mitigate the adverse social, economic, and health impacts associated with a globalized food system. One example of an approach designed to mitigate these effects is the development of, and consumer participation in, alternative food systems (AFS). Factors that drive participation in AFS are largely unexplored. This article uses consumer interviews in Vermont to deepen our understanding of participation in AFS. We find that stacked beliefs about AFS drive participation, suggesting that barriers such as price and convenience may be overcome when these beliefs are more numerous. Implications focus on strategies for better promoting values and decreasing barriers in order to increase participation in and concomitant benefits of AFS.

KEYWORDS alternative food system, local food, food access

INTRODUCTION

No longer the passive recipients of whatever the food industries supply, ‘food citizens’ must act reflexively and proactively to re-invent for themselves their identities and practices as food consumers.1(p200)
The globalized food system (GFS) has been associated with downturns in social, environmental, and human health. As a result, a social movement and many market and social institutions have arisen as means to address these issues. Scholars have referred to this in many terms, including alternative food systems (AFS), quality turn, alternative agri-food networks, civic agriculture, and good food networks. Foods are considered to be a part of AFS if they hold values that oppose poor quality, environmental, or moral standards often associated with the GFS, including animal welfare, growing practices, food safety, taste, aesthetics, farmer and community economic well-being, and environmental stewardship. Such foods, considered to be a part of AFS, are often sold through direct markets, home and community gardens, farm stands, and box schemes or community-supported agriculture (CSA) membership but can also increasingly be acquired through conventional channels such as grocery stores. Many studies have discussed the community development potential of AFS; their expansion is seen as having an array of social, economic, and environmental benefits.

There are widely recognized barriers associated with AFS direct markets, both financial and cultural. Programs such as the “Double-Up Bucks” program in Michigan or the “Boston Bounty Bucks” program in Boston, Massachusetts, incentivize purchase of foods sold through farmers’ markets, considered a prominent AFS channel, by doubling the value of benefits dollar for dollar up to a $10 purchase; twice the value of food therefore may be obtained compared with purchasing through non-farmers’ market channels. Programs such as these have helped to decrease the barrier of price, although other trade-offs such as convenience and barriers such as knowledge and cultural norms may still exist.

Understanding consumer behavior around AFS purchases therefore may lead to policy or market-driven directives that could increase participation and in turn increase the positive effects associated with consumer participation in AFS. This study aims to understand the following: What is the relationship between beliefs around AFS and food purchase behavior? To what extent do values drive participation in AFS? What are the key barriers to greater participation?

METHODS

To explore consumer participation in AFS, we interviewed individuals with diverse shopping and income patterns. Interviews were conducted until no new themes appeared; in total 20 subjects were interviewed. Data collection took place in January and February 2011 in Burlington, Vermont.
Site Description

The particular geography chosen for the study offers residents a wide range of food purchasing venue options, including convenience stores, supermarket chain stores, farmers’ markets, a food cooperative, and opportunities for CSA membership in the immediate area.

Within this city, there are 4 conventional grocery stores, with the public transportation system servicing each of these locations. At the city center is a food cooperative, where part of the mission is to serve low- and middle-income families. Food stamp redemptions in this cooperative have grown in recent years to $90 000 per month, although some city residents regard this venue as catering to higher-income members. A special emphasis is placed on locally grown foods in this marketplace, although specialty foods and national brands are also offered. Convenience stores are numerous, at approximately 26 locations, and especially prevalent in economically depressed neighborhoods. There are 5 weekly farmers’ markets in different neighborhoods that operate 4 days per week between May and October. One market is offered year-round in the city center.\(^{16}\)

Participant Selection

Human subjects review approval was obtained. To recruit participants, fliers advertising compensation of $25 were posted in grocery stores, in convenience stores, on public bulletin boards, and at a seasonal farmers’ market. Semistructured interviews were conducted in a university setting using a pilot-tested interview guide that covered food purchasing decisions, knowledge, and beliefs surrounding the food system. Grounded theory methodology was used to refine the interview guide as more interviews were conducted, to allow for emergence of new ideas and themes surrounding food system participation.\(^{17}\)

Analysis

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software version 19 (QSR International, Victoria, Australia). A second coder was used to independently identify themes from the transcripts. Analysis was focused on themes of values and motivations, barriers, and behaviors.

RESULTS

In total, there were 15 female and 5 male participants. Two were African American; the remaining 18 participants were Caucasian. Nine participants indicated receiving government monetary food purchasing assistance, and
TABLE 1 Participant Characteristics (n = 20)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Has been a CSA member at least once</th>
<th>Has shopped at direct market more than once</th>
<th>Buys majority of food at conventional grocery</th>
<th>Buys majority of food at cooperative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (n = 5)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (n = 15)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residence</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban (n = 13)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban (n = 5)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural (n = 2)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food assistance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (n = 9)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (n = 11)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CSA indicates community-supported agriculture.*

13 indicated their residence to be urban. Eleven respondents indicated conventional grocery stores to be the primary place of food purchases; 9 indicated membership in a CSA at one time. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

The interview data reveal several recurring themes, which are described in detail in the following section. Respondents who participated in AFS indicated an increased likelihood of purchasing foods from direct markets, such as farmers’ markets or through CSA membership, or indicated growing their own food (Table 2). The themes that arose during the interviews include connection of health and diet, voting with one’s dollar, and provenance.

Connecting Health and Diet

Thirteen participants considered a health event or crisis, either directly or indirectly, as influencing participation in AFS versus GFS. Eleven respondents indicated participating in AFS based upon a direct health crisis or concern; these respondents indicated purchasing foods through direct markets in order to avoid processed foods and chemical or hormonal applications on foods, which they associated with GFS. One respondent, for example, indicated how health issues motivated a deeper interest in food: “I had a lot of health problems a few years ago and I went on a really restrictive diet which got me really interested in food and food systems” (5A). Participants were numbered based on increasing participation in AFS. This participant indicated primarily purchasing foods through direct markets to avoid processed foods and foods grown without toxic chemical applications.

Two of the 13 participants who indicated purchasing foods associated with AFS after experiencing an indirect health crisis indicated the belief that the health crisis was associated with GFS. Both of these participants
TABLE 2 Respondent Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Food assistance</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Residence setting</th>
<th>CSA Member at one time</th>
<th>Has purchased from direct markets</th>
<th>Primarily Shops at conventional grocery store</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td></td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
<td>Suburban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CSA indicates community-supported agriculture.

discussed seeking out foods raised without hormones or are organically grown through conventional channels. Both of these participants indicated price as a major barrier toward consistent purchases of such foods, as well as knowledge, and did not indicate further values around AFS, other than supporting the local economy, in addition to health concerns of products derived from livestock raised in GFS. For example, one participant directly linked her lack of action to change her diet, despite her beliefs related to health, to her budget constraint: “I mean I have back problems, that’s why I’m on social security, and, I mean, I try as best I can to, I mean, it’d probably be good if I went on a diet, but diets are expensive . . .” (20A). This respondent did not indicate beliefs around AFS but rather discussed her beliefs around whole foods consumption versus processed food consumption.

Another participant cited knowledge as a barrier to consistent purchases of unprocessed foods; she described how she wished to improve her diet in order to improve her health:

I have a health issue . . . and that’s why I took the [nutrition] class, so I could start eating healthier. I started eating better and started feeling better and started losing weight. But then I kind of got away from that without the grocery store, but the gals and I are trying to work that out. I think I just need more classes. (18A)
This participant indicated continuing to regularly purchase processed and prepared foods from conventional channels such as convenience stores and did not discuss differentiations between AFS and GFS.

Animal Raising Practices and Human Health Impact

Some participants indicated concern and knowledge around animal raising practices and how this concern influenced their personal health, but this did not necessarily indicate participation in AFS. One respondent, for example, indicated regular purchase of conventional meat associated with GFS, despite knowledge of potential health and ethical benefits of purchasing meat associated with AFS: “The regular meat that I buy that’s probably injected with hormones and the animals aren’t humanely killed or have good vibes and things like that. Intellectually I know that, but I don’t think about that when I’m in the super market shopping” (13A). This respondent connected health and diet but did not mention other beliefs surrounding AFS, such as farmer economic well-being or environmental stewardship (Table 3).

Another respondent cited price as a trade-off when purchasing meat associated with AFS versus GFS: “Treatment of the animals, what they are being treated with, if they are being held in stalls, if they are on antibiotics. I have just become more aware, . . . but the stuff that isn’t right is cheaper, so I have low income so I’m kind of stuck” (18B).

**TABLE 3** Cross-tabulations of Procurement Locale and Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Direct market and CSA membership (n = 7) (%)</th>
<th>Shop direct markets (n = 5) (%)</th>
<th>Primarily shops conventional channels (n = 8) (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal health issues affect purchases</td>
<td>4 57</td>
<td>5 100</td>
<td>4 50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connect health and diet (belief)</td>
<td>7 100</td>
<td>4 80</td>
<td>6 75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal welfare</td>
<td>7 100</td>
<td>3 60</td>
<td>2 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wants to support farmer</td>
<td>7 100</td>
<td>3 60</td>
<td>2 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value small scale</td>
<td>7 100</td>
<td>2 40</td>
<td>3 38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote with dollar</td>
<td>7 100</td>
<td>2 40</td>
<td>1 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>6 86</td>
<td>4 80</td>
<td>2 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provenance</td>
<td>5 71</td>
<td>1 20</td>
<td>0 0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aCSA indicates community-supported agriculture.*
Farmer economic well-being was discussed by 12 participants, some of whom thought the idea of supporting farmers was good in theory, but it did not influence participation in AFS. Though some felt strongly that purchasing AFS foods from direct markets was essential to supporting farmer economic well-being, others felt more ambivalent about the connection. One participant described a “sacrificial” (5E) purchasing pattern, where she placed the economic well-being of the farmer before her own, thinking that her purchases were essential to these farms’ existence. This participant in particular, along with others who shared this feeling, described strong beliefs associated with environmental stewardship and discussed community well-being as an important result of supporting small farms. These participants indicated purchasing these foods primarily from direct markets and growing their own food.

Environmental stewardship

Consideration of environment and ecology in terms of how the food was raised, transported, and packaged tended to overlap with concerns of animal welfare; organic versus nonorganic purchases; and the perception that small-scale farms had better environmental safeguards than commercial-scale operations associated with GFS. A participant noted,

> We are striving to eat as cleanly as possible, just in terms of our own health and what we take in, but then on a larger scale, um environmentally, and the impact, because I think it's very short sighted to think that we're not all paying a price for those toxins that are going downstream, and in the water and the air and all the animals, from every perspective. (2B)

This participant discusses 2 themes of connecting health and diet and environmental impacts. This participant indicated shopping primarily at direct markets and primarily seeking foods associated with AFS principles. Tradeoffs such as price were still discussed in relation to this theme; for example, “For eggs, I am going for as much feel good, cage free, no grain, blah blah blah, without going beyond my price point” (5G).

Scale

Twelve participants indicated that perceived or known scale of a food producer would influence participation in AFS. The response to large-scale
operations was generally adverse and many of those who purchased food associated with AFS (interviewee identifications 1–9; Table 2) pointed out the importance of scale of farm operation in their food purchasing decisions:

If it looks like something was thrown together on a farm, with like, you know people are working hard, they don’t have the time to put the sticker on straight and things like that, that’s actually something I am very attracted to, because it feels like a small operation. But you know if I see something that is perfectly labeled [“food company”] with this graphically designed label, I am actually not very interested in that. It seems very big, like a big operation and I am not very attracted to that. I can sort of imagine the people on the other side of it. . . . (5G)

When probed further, this respondent indicated that such a label indicated “that it’s an established organization and they don’t need my help” (5H). Another respondent, who also indicated regularly purchasing AFS foods stated, “I am definitely a sucker for Joe Shmoe and his little farm [laughs]. ’Cause corporations are just so evil, you know?” (1B). Many of these respondents also brought up the importance of supporting small farms for the sake of supporting the local community and were also observed to indicate direct markets as the primary venue of their food purchases.

Provenance

Provenance, or association of food with its origin, was discussed by 7 participants as having weight in food purchasing decisions. Although place of origin is not necessarily correlated with freshness and positive aesthetics, many participants conflated these 2 themes, indicating that being local signified freshness or superior nutritional qualities. Food aesthetics overall, however, were discussed on a variety of levels, from using aesthetics as a quality heuristic to determining nutrition and taste: “So I’ll look at it and if it looks good then I’ll go with the deal and if not then it’s just going to be a little more expensive and not cause any sickness” (17B). These participants, however, did not necessarily differentiate between AFS and GFS foods; rather, only physical aesthetics were considered in relation to taste and food safety.

Knowing your farmer: knowing your food

There was an aspect of trust often associated with having the option of holding a farmer accountable for safe and moral practices: “I care about their standards and how they care for their animals, I like to eat food from people that I know, and so I make a point of meeting farmers and I’ve met them, and I think they’re fantastic, so now I’m going to support them” (2D). There is a sense here of shared values and voting for the type of food system one would
want to see by supporting the farmers who uphold these standards. Although only 3 participants indicated that they had actually gone to a farm to see the quality and standards to which food was being grown, others enjoyed the idea that they had the option to check on this if desired. One participant who indicated frequenting conventional grocery stores, although gardening at one point in his life and visiting an apple orchard on a community outing, did not indicate participation in AFS based upon knowing farmers. He did, however, indicate that he felt the only food one can truly “trust” is that which is grown on one’s own. This participant indicated being on food assistance at the time and did not mention factors such as provenance, supporting the farmer, community building, or animal welfare.

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS
Although some interviewees expressed little connection between their food and those growing it, many respondents enjoyed connecting with the person selling the food to them, because they found it easier to trust that source, regardless of the perceived growing practices. One respondent indicated that her choice of stands at the farmers’ market

It comes down to the relationship I have with the farmer because some of those people come every week and you know they know my family, and I know them, you know it just depends on if I’m having a conversation with them at one point. (1D)

These respondents indicated finding this connection through purchases at direct marketing venues.

There were also some negative aspects of having a personal connection through direct markets: “I don’t go to the farmers’ markets, it’s just too much of a social scene for me [laughs]; I just want to go and shop, and not have to talk to anybody” (17C). Feeling a personal connection at some point in the purchasing process however, was not limited to those shopping at direct markets or those who indicated participation in AFS. Two participants who did not differentiate values associated with AFS versus GFS indicated “feeling good” about food associated with GFS, which was recommended by grocers in person at conventional grocery stores.

ANALYSIS
This study identified a wide spectrum of participation and engagement in the alternative food system. Though some participants indicated strong participation in AFS by indicating no, or very minimal, participation in foods
associated with GFS, others held some beliefs associated with AFS but cited barriers to participation in AFS, such as knowledge, and cited trade-offs such as price and convenience. Those indicating more regular purchases of foods associated with AFS were also observed to hold more numerous values associated with AFS, described as themes in this article. Those participants indicating relatively less purchases of foods associated with AFS were observed to indicate primary food purchasing venue as conventional venues, such as chain grocery stores, and also discussed fewer beliefs associated with AFS versus GFS. This pattern is demonstrated in Table 4, where those who indicated supporting farmers to be an important attribute in their decision-making process also mentioned beliefs around AFS, such as animal welfare, scale of farm, and voting with one’s dollar.

The relationship between more frequent purchases associated with AFS through channels such as direct markets and having more numerous beliefs associated with AFS is depicted in Figure 1. Where purchasing foods associated with AFS was seen to increase with having mentioned more beliefs associated with AFS, purchasing from direct markets or other venues associated with selling foods primarily holding values associated with AFS was seen to be based upon a more reflexive agency as part of a self-defined social norm, rather than active opposition of the negative values associated with GFS.\textsuperscript{18}

Price and convenience were cited as trade-offs, and knowledge was cited as a barrier to purchasing foods associated with AFS. Respondents who mentioned fewer beliefs associated with AFS were observed to frequent

\begin{table}[h]
\caption{Cross-tabulation on Themes}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lccc}
\hline
 & Support farmer & & \\
 & No (%) & Yes (%) & Row total n \\
\hline
Connect health and diet & & & \\
No & 25 & 8 & 3 \\
Yes & 75 & 92 & 17 \\
Total & 100 & 100 & 20 \\
Scale & & & \\
No & 63 & 25 & 8 \\
Yes & 38 & 75 & 12 \\
Total & 100 & 100 & 20 \\
Vote with dollar & & & \\
No & 88 & 25 & 10 \\
Yes & 13 & 75 & 10 \\
Total & 100 & 100 & 20 \\
Provenance & & & \\
No & 100 & 42 & 13 \\
Yes & 0 & 58 & 7 \\
Total & 100 & 100 & 20 \\
Animal welfare & & & \\
No & 50 & 35 & 8 \\
Yes & 50 & 67 & 12 \\
Total & 100 & 100 & 20 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
FIGURE 1 Factors influencing participation in AFS vs GFS.

conventional food purchasing venues and display less agency toward seeking foods associated with AFS.

It shows that as consumers stack on more concerns over the globalized food system such as animal welfare, farmer economic well-being, provenance, etc, stronger agency is exhibited toward participation in the alternative food system. These concerns and values, however, as shown in Figure 2, can gain or lose importance at various points over a consumer’s purchasing history and be outweighed by trade-offs such as price and convenience and barriers such as lack of knowledge. Engagement in the alternative food system, therefore, may be driven either by adding a value associated with AFS through experience or by strengthening a value that already exists toward AFS.

Interviews revealed instances of media such as graphic videos and advertisements of animal abuse shifting beliefs about animal welfare in the food system, but barriers such as price and convenience left these respondents continuing their participation in the globalized food system. The salience of this knowledge, therefore, was not enough to outweigh price and convenience trade-offs. If other factors like farmer economic well-being or environmental health were added to these beliefs, there would potentially be a tipping point at which agency is formed to move toward and participate in the alternative food system (see Table 4 and Figure 1). Word of mouth from friends, social media, federal campaigns, and general awareness of the importance of such issues will begin to attract a broader spectrum of individuals to take agency toward supporting alternatives to the globalized food system. Alternatively, the trade-offs and barriers associated with purchasing foods associated with AFS may continue to be decreased by increasing access to these foods regarding convenience, price, and knowledge.
FIGURE 2 Stacking values regarding AFS. Note: Belief and action here are differentiated to distinguish between those respondents who thought about health and diet being connected, but trade-offs such as price and convenience and barriers such as knowledge prevented them from acting upon these benefits.

DISCUSSION

Participation in AFS has been associated with many positive outcomes, such as strengthening the sense of community, expanding awareness of potentially harmful food production methods, and offering an alternative channel by which consumers can express values in the marketplace. Food choice, however, is a highly complex decision-making process that has traditionally been based on demographic measures such as class, religion, and cultural norms. In this study, however, we explore psychographic measures of participation and engagement in the alternative food system. This study suggests that consumers build a set of values that drive participation in AFS: as these values expand in number and strength, so does the agency in participating in the alternative food system.

This study suggests that promoting consumers to develop stronger and more numerous values toward the alternative food system may create the tipping point by which such consumers choose AFS over potentially more attractive price and convenience factors present in the globalized food system. Goldberg stated, "A problem or condition may never have existed before or it may always have been a feature of life, but until individuals perceive it as immediate and personal – salient – such a circumstance will rarely inspire conscious protest." Making issues such as animal welfare; farmer economic well-being; nutritious, fresh food availability; environmental issues; concerns of scale of operations; and provenance more salient to a broad array of consumers may aid in broadening the reach and consistency in participation in the alternative food system.
To elicit participation in the alternative food system, these beliefs must outweigh the barriers, which were found to be price, convenience, lack of knowledge, and cultural norms or routine. Beliefs around alternative food systems were found to vary for different consumers and include personal experiences that would be difficult or undesirable to create or induce among consumers, such as health crises or negative experiences related to foods offered through the globalized food system. A more straightforward option may be to decrease the barriers that dictate participation in the globalized food system over the alternative food system. This would include making direct marketing venues less culturally exclusive. For example, it was observed in this study that participants on food assistance indicated primarily shopping at conventional grocery stores, although some of these participants indicated having values associated with AFN. Although some indicated that it was price that kept them away from direct markets, there was evidence from the interviews indicating that individuals shopped at venues at which they were comfortable, and a direct marketing venue can be intimidating if one has never had experience in approaching and purchasing from such a venue.

For example, having food that holds values and standards associated with animal welfare, environmental stewardship, and farmer economic well-being available in venues and in forms that more closely resemble those foods typically associated with the globalized food system and that are price competitive could more readily broaden the market for food holding such positive values. For example, this study and other studies have found that venues such as a conventional grocery store or convenience store are more culturally appropriate or comfortable versus a farmers’ market or direct marketing venue, despite practical considerations of price or convenience. Although there is value to the consumer in purchasing food through direct marketing channels, such as relations of regard, \(^6,^{11}\) broadening the market for foods grown with regard for social, environmental, and nutritional impact will be important in mitigating the negative effects associated with the globalized food system. Broadening participation, therefore, may require creating a bridge where participating in the alternative food system will not feel so challenging to consumers.

Policy recommendations in light of this study are two-fold:

1. To increase the market for foods associated with the alternative food system, campaigns could articulate the values associated with alternative food systems through experiential, classroom, and media learning opportunities, such as making farm visits, farmers’ markets, and CSAs more accessible, using social media campaigns, etc, for both children and adults. This study revealed participants gaining values around the alternative food system through social media, classroom work, and experiential
learning. Making more of the issues surrounding the globalized food system more salient for individuals will aid in the “stacking” effect seen in this study to encourage more consistent participation in the alternative food system.

2. The second recommendation, which may be more effective in the short term, is to limit the barriers that were seen to hinder participation in the alternative food system, where consumers can purchase foods associated with positive values through means that do not feel dissimilar to their typical food purchasing routine. This could mean that such foods can compete with foods offered through the globalized food system based on price, convenience, and purchasing location. There are many examples of successful ways to decrease barriers of price toward participation in AFN, such as Boston’s Bounty Bucks Program, but more can be done to break down other barriers such as convenience, knowledge, and cultural norms. Although programs that make fresh food more affordable increase some aspects of access, one cannot make the assumption that lower income individuals necessarily have the time or interest to prepare such raw foods, no matter how affordable they are. For example, where some study participants indicated that purchasing a ready-to-cook or packaged meal at a convenience store was more accessible to them versus purchasing raw ingredients at a farmers’ market, perhaps meal kits could be made available at a similar venue using ingredients associated with values associated with AFS. A combination of decreasing barriers to accessibility, while improving knowledge and strength of values around the positive attributes associated with alternative food systems, will aid in creating market demand in opposition to the negative effects associated with the globalized food system.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined beliefs associated with participation in alternative food systems. This was done through semistructured interviews (n = 20), which were analyzed inductively. Consumers who exhibit agency toward purchasing foods associated with AFS also discussed several themes, including connecting health and diet, connecting food with external impacts, and provenance. It was observed that those consumers who more often purchased foods associated with AFS values discussed more of the aforementioned themes, such that having more beliefs around the alternative food system seems to drive participation in AFS. It was also observed that those who indicated more often purchasing foods associated with AFS also purchased foods through direct marketing venues as opposed to conventional venues such as chain grocery stores or convenience stores. Although foods associated with AFS are more likely to be found in direct marketing venues,
they may also be found in conventional venues. This study observed some respondents who held some values around AFS to continue to see price or knowledge as reasons to purchase foods associated with GFS versus AFS.

Limitations of this research include a limited sample size and potential participant selection bias in which the study recruited participants by indicating an interview session about “how you buy food.” Results are not generalizable to any other population. Although the stipend functioned to mitigate those who chose to participate solely based on the topic, there were several participants who indicated avid participation in alternative food systems who considered themselves to be strong advocates of such participation and may represent extreme, nonrepresentative cases. The sample largely reached the 2 ends of a continuum but failed to represent the large number of conventional grocery shoppers who were not on some form of food assistance. Future studies, therefore, may look at the relationship of stacking values and participation in the alternative food system for this subsample.

Future studies should expand upon this study by using a representative sample to test strength of beliefs and patterns of action associated with participation in the alternative food system. A survey method could be employed using the themes identified in this study to develop questions that test beliefs around alternative food systems as associated with psychographic and demographic measures.

REFERENCES

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